German neo-Nazis and anti-capitalism - Jan Langehein

Jan Langehein discusses Fascist forms of "Anti-Capitalism" within the German context. Article originally published in the summer of 2007.

The 'social question' has been a focus for propaganda by German neo-Nazis in the past, yet not always did this have an anti-capitalist touch to it. After the reunification of the old GDR with the Federal Republic in autumn 1990, the whole of Germany experienced a rise in unemployment; poverty levels increased in the East and West. Responsibility lay, on the one hand, with the collapse and sale of the industry in the former planned economy, and on the other hand a structural crisis of the capitalist economy in the reunified Germany. Far Right political parties, at the time primarily the DVU and the more moderate Republicans, responded at first with a traditional racism; they exploited the situation for their purposes by blaming migrant labourers and a relatively high number of political refugees for the poverty. The centre-right governing party CDU also looked at migrants as scapegoats for the crisis, accusing them of being responsible for the millions of unemployed and the collapse of the economy in East Germany. Even the liberal magazine 'Der Spiegel' [comparable to 'the Economist' in its influence; translator's note] ran headlines suggesting that there was no place for refugees in reunified Germany.

The result of this agitation were dozens of deaths, some beaten or burned to death by Nazi attackers, some driven by German border police into the Oder river, which separates Germany from Poland. The dreadful developments culminated in August 1992: large parts of the population of Lichtenhagen, a suburb of Rostock, together with organised neo-Nazis and aided by the police's inaction, attacked a refugee's hostel over days and attempted to set fire to it. The "days of Rostock" received worldwide media attention, and victims of the past - from Russia via Poland to Israel – feared a resurrection of Nazi Germany. Far from pressing ahead with an intensified fight against the neo-Nazis, the German government responded to the situation by basically abolishing the asylum rights and thereby fulfilling a central neo-Nazi demand.

As mentioned, this still followed the pattern of a traditional racism, to be expected from neo-Nazis. The anti-capitalist 'change of direction' for the German Nazis only happened at the beginning of the new millennium and is connected to partly two factors: firstly, the National Democratic Party (NPD), with closer historical ties to Hitler's NSDAP than DVU and Republicans, gained in importance; secondly, the focus of right-wing perception in Germany moved, after 9/11, from migration to the USA and Israel. The NPD's self-understanding is as an anti-communist as well as an anti-capitalist party. One of its slogans is: "No to Communism, no to Capitalism, yes to German Socialism!"

The political program of this 'German Socialism' is based on the ideas of the NSDAP's left-wing 'Strasser faction', which until 1934 comprised almost four million members. Its aim was not to nationalise the industrial establishment, but still to submit it to state control and to build a Berlin-centred structure of command. The centre of control was meant to turn workers from "free sellers of their labour power" into recipients of commands by the 'Führer'. Those ideas were impossible to put into practice only because Hitler was not prepared to take power away from German industrialists. Just as the NSDAP, the NPD too does not regard capital as an all-encompassing social relationship, but divides it into 'productive capital' (workers and entrepreneurs) and 'unproductive or money-reaping capital', which without working itself exploits the fruits of honest labour. For the historical Nazis, behind this 'unproductive'

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capital was both the ‘bolshevism’ of the Soviet Union, as well as British and American

‘plutocracy’ with its superior economic strength. In the final instance however, both parts were seen as mere ‘stooges’ of a Jewish global conspiracy, which aimed at world domination and the destruction of the livelihoods of all ‘peoples’.

This is exactly the worldview that the NPD [now the most influential neo-Nazi party in Germany, translator’s note] has adopted today with its anti-capitalist rhetoric. Now they blame ‘Wall Street’ together with the US and Israeli governments for plotting to wipe out

‘peoples’ and ‘cultures’. ‘German Socialism’, they say, should take up the fight against

‘foreign influences’ and build instead a geographically-defined economic order – a European internal market under German control, removed from the global economy and in a world without Jews. It is a ‘culturalist’ and anti-Semitic nightmare, which wants to achieve for modern Europe precisely those plans that Hitler’s strategists had drawn up.

The NPD has understood that it can reach more people with its agitation against the USA and Israel than with the polemic against refugees and migrants. Since the pogrom of Rostock, open racism is ostracised, while the hatred of America and resentments against ‘Zionism’ are almost regarded as proof of one’s critical faculties. Many Germans believe themselves to be

‘critics of globalisation or capitalism’. They do not understand, however, that this should mean primarily a critique of one’s own society. Instead, they look for the reasons of hunger, poverty and violence solely in the policies of Israel and America. This is where neo-Nazis move in: In spring 2007, they initiated a national campaign against the G8-summit in Heiligendamm, which used the same rhetoric as left-wing critics of globalisation. Now, the NPD attempts to organise a co-operation with the main left-wing party ‘the Left’, a successor to the old GDR’s ‘Socialist Unity Party’. While ‘the Left’ is decidedly anti-fascist, its electorate frequently comprises supporters of the authoritarian GDR, which is open to right-wing ideas. The NPD has already managed to be voted into a number of regional parliaments of East Germany. In Saxony, the parliamentary faction of the NPD regularly gains votes by members of other political factions. Nonetheless, the critique of globalisation in Germany is not yet a field dominated by the neo-Nazis. Sometimes however, it is almost impossible to differentiate between anti-capitalist positions with a progressive, emancipatory or with a fascistic, anti-Semitic direction.

Regrettably, the German Left has little to offer in terms of response to the neo-Nazi anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist change of focus. The racism of the 1990s was countered by a still active anti-racist movement, which provides assistance to refugees and attempts to resist racist attacks on migrants. However, anti-American and anti-Semitic positions can also be found in large parts of Left, with left-wing and right-wing anti-imperialist writings hardly distinguishable from each other. What unites both sides is primarily the ‘culturalist’

(völkisch) element of their critiques. Both sides support the terror of Hamas and al-Qaeda against Israelis and civilians of other Western states, while they differ only in their positions to Germany. For the Left, Germans form part of the oppressors, while for the Right, Germans are victims. Ironically, a ‘deserter’ of the Left formulated the Nazi propaganda phrase of the

“jewish-american imperialist conspiracy”: Horst Mahler, a one time fighter and co-founder of the left-wing underground organisation Red Army Faction (RAF), is now lawyer and NPD-politico.

For a few years now, a small but publicly outspoken section of the German Left has criticised this phenomenon. Periodicals such as ‘Phase 2’, ‘Bahamas’ or ‘Jungle World’ point out that the NPD, despite its traditional racism, is looking to co-operate with culturalist-religious organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, while co-operation between the Left and those same groups exists too. Several groups of the German autonomous and anti-fascist movement have adopted this criticism. Nonetheless, the Left’s response to the neo-Nazis turned anti-

capitalists is still one of uneasiness. Anti-capitalism? Isn't that an anti-fascist subject? Nazis have got nothing to say about it! Often it is said that neo-Nazi anti-capitalism is a mere masquerade, hiding the affirmative role Nazis play for capital. However, such a point of view is not just dumb but also dangerous. The danger is that the German Left refuses to abandon its mistaken positions and becomes, in some respects, indistinguishable from the Nazis. There is the chance, however, to rethink and to reformulate its own critique of capitalism – counter the fascist variant, for the progress and emancipation of humanity and in strict opposition to all anti-Semitic tendencies.

iStill today, evidence suggests that the government had a hand in the pogrom of Rostock or at least tolerated it. The excellent BBC documentary “The truth lies in Rostock” can be recommended.

ii[The original German term here is ‘völkisch’, derived from the word ‘Volk’ meaning

‘people’ or ‘nation’. ‘Volk’ makes a strong reference to ethnicity, autochthonous culture and nationalism and is a central organising principle for the Nazi movement, which opposes it to the idea of ‘rootless’ capital, translator’s note]

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